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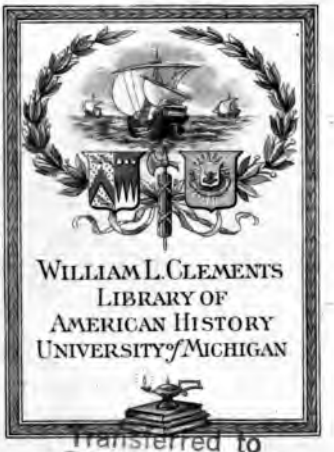

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Napoleon III. and American Diplomacy

at the

Outbreak of the Civil War.

NAPOLEON III. AND AMERICAN DIPLOMACY AT THE OUTBREAK OF THE CIVIL WAR.

BY LEWIS EINSTEIN.

An Address read in French before the Société d'Histoire Diplomatique at Paris, on the Ninth of June, 1905.

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WHEN the passions of men have once been deeply stirred in civil strife, it is rare that the same generation which has fought in battle should later join in friendship, its ties reunited over fallen comrades. Nor is it least of America's claims that she has healed every wound of

war and left conquerors and conquered rightly proud of their share in a conflict from which all sting of bitterness has disappeared. Just as the veterans of North and South have met as friends on former battlefields so both sides can now look back and see in Napoleon's desire to aid the Confederacy the proof of sympathy extended to a great section of the American people in a cause which it believed righteous.

After well nigh half a century it is easy to recognize the impression created abroad by the Federal Government's indecision on the eve of the Civil War. If republican institutions had always seemed in the nature of an experiment to European statesmen, their sudden lack of stability appeared to justify every misgiving. It must be confessed that the want of real insight which so often makes nations, like individuals, misjudge each other, was not here to blame. The spectacle of four years' governmental

impotence had just been witnessed in America. Prominent public men, either by timidity or else imbued with the innocuous liberalism of that period, declared it barbarous to forcibly retain unwilling members in a union of States which had fought under a common flag; and our Legations in Europe spread the belief that though disunion might be deprecated, force would not be invoked to prevent it. This impression of Northern indecision and of consequent Northern failure, could only have been corroborated by the despatches foreign envoys sent from Washington, where the circles in which they moved were then slave-holding in sympathy. If a European diplomatist cast his eyes to the other side of the Potomac in contradiction with the North, he would have seen the South presenting a solid front, and heard each State's sovereign right to secede loudly proclaimed by its leaders and scarcely denied even by those who upheld the Union. If he read the

Constitution of the United States he must have realized that by the letter of its law, the Confederates possessed a legal justification in secession. If on the other hand, he turned to the new government at Washington, he saw only an untried Administration at the helm. In the White House itself, was a raw-boned giant, born in a log cabin in the wilderness, the son of an illiterate frontiersman, brought to power almost by an accident, as the head of a new party which was causing the South, with its political traditions dating back from the beginning of the Republic, to secede. If, finally, he examined the armed forces at the Government's disposal, he saw its strongest arsenals already in hostile hands, and the foremost officers in the Army, like Robert Lee, refusing commands and resigning commissions to follow their native State. And he was soon to witness, as if in fulfilment of expectation, the first military success crowning the Southern cause, and the raw

levies of the North hurled back by the equally raw levies of the South. It is no wonder that diplomatists at Washington sent reports to their Governments tinctured with the belief in the imminent breaking up of the Republic. Napoleon frankly told the American Minister at Paris, that he believed the Union cause would never succeed, an opinion, he said, shared by European statesmen. And Europe, thus expecting Southern success, manifested Southern sympathy.

If at the outbreak of the Civil War the Old World misjudged the strength and purpose of the North, the North likewise underrated the causes which would have influenced its goodwill. By making the war a crusade against slavery, it could have aroused such popular feeling abroad that no Government would have cared to face the indignation of its subjects by siding with the South. But the moment was not yet ripe for this, and to save the

border States where Union feeling was strong, but where slavery was also regarded as a fundamental institution, the question of abolition had to be kept in the background. Hence, instead of the North claiming the benefit of foreign opinion, Europe largely accepted the Southern plea, that in the spirit of their ancestors of 1776 they were fighting for liberty and self-government, and it gave them that sympathy which those who claim oppression will always receive.

To guide the foreign policy of the nation, Lincoln selected for Secretary of State, William F. Seward, long prominent in public life as Governor of New York, later as United States Senator, and his own unsuccessful opponent at the Presidential Convention. It is at all times paltry acknowledgment of the value of any man to dismiss his life work in a sentence. Especially is this true of one like Seward. The evolution which the responsibilities of his new office were to effect on him

render doubly difficult any hasty judgment of his character or ability. But of no one can it be said more truly, that if he entered on his new duties a politician, he left them a Statesman. He was aided by his extraordinary brilliancy of pen and speech, a great charm of personality and swiftness at repartee. To a lady, who once asked him a state secret, he replied: "Madam, if I did not know I would tell you." He had the gift, moreover, of being on the best terms even with his political adversaries. Long after the war, Drouyn de Lhuys recalled to him that when the relations between France and the United States were at fever point, he had thought of sending him excellent cigars.

Like many Secretaries of State, Seward was without the training which comes from service abroad, but he had gained insight into political life and a certain experience on the Senate Committee of Foreign Affairs. Perhaps, because of this groove of politics

in which he lived, he completely misjudged the situation at the outbreak of the Civil War, in the same way as he had misjudged Lincoln. This double error led to a strange result. Believing it was possible to preserve the Union by peaceful measures, but that the South could never be subdued, he was unable to realize that civil strife was inevitable. He wished to assert his own mastery over the President, and by the same measure to preserve the country from the disastrous effects of a domestic war. This accounts for the strange programme submitted by him to Lincoln's approval which, in more recent times, Mr. Hay, Lincoln's former Private Secretary, to-day himself Secretary of State, has made public in his remarkable life of his former chief. Seward hoped, by provoking a foreign conflict, to curb all secessionist tendencies, and that, in the face of a common enemy a wave of patriotic Americanism would once more sweep over the entire country. He believed

that before a great national danger the Confederate leaders would be obliged to abandon their desire for separation, and by exchanging a foreign for a civil war instead of dividing he would succeed in again uniting North and South. Possessed with this idea, he advised the President to at once demand categorical explanations for trumped up grievances from Spain, France, Great Britain and Russia, to send agents into Canada, Mexico, and Central America to arouse a vigorous spirit of American independence against alleged European aggression, and, if satisfactory explanations from the Powers should not be received, to then convene Congress and declare war against the foreigner. Lincoln's good sense on this, as on a later occasion, saved the country from the disastrous effect of such a policy. For Seward's idea of the utility of a foreign conflict was not at once dispelled. A long despatch, penned by him six weeks later to our Minister in London, was still

full of warlike purpose. But before it was sent, Lincoln struck out the indiscretions it contained, and gave instructions that, instead of being shown to the Foreign Office, it was to be regarded by our Legation as strictly confidential. A copy of the original draft of this despatch has been preserved with Lincoln's alterations and comments which rendered it harmless. It affords but one more proof of the full extent of his counsel in pervading every branch of the Administration. Tactfully avoiding antagonism with a Secretary of State whose value he appreciated, the President accomplished all that was necessary without allowing the country to suspect the danger averted by his foresight.

To us of a later generation, who now look back on his task, Lincoln remains the heroic figure of American history, the living symbol of a new democratic civilisation wrested from the wilderness, destined for a mighty end. In the greatest crisis our nation has been

called to face, Lincoln grew with every situation, drawing the strength of his purpose, which was to save the Republic, from the difficulties before him. With his surface of plainness and with the word of homely humour on his lips, his real greatness sprang from incarnating what is best in the American people, simplicity of nature coupled with high resolution. But all through that eventful month which followed his inauguration as President, and preceded the outbreak of hostilities, it is doubtful if even he realised the measure of what was coming. Charles Francis Adams, the son and grandson of Presidents, brought up in the formality of ancient traditions, who had just been appointed Minister to the Court of St. James, has left an amusing account of his first and only interview with Lincoln which then took place. The country was already plunged in a crisis anxiously watched by Europe when Adams was summoned to Washington, to receive verbal instructions

before leaving for his post. Deeply impressed by the responsibility awaiting him, he accompanied Seward to the White House. Presently a large featured, shabbily dressed man of uncouth appearance, slouched into the room. He wore coarse stockings, worn slippers, and ill-fitting trousers. He seemed in manner constrained and shy. Adams, introduced by Seward, made the conventional remarks, but the President cut him short, answering indifferently that the nomination was due to the Secretary of State, to whom he then turned and waving aside the foreign policy of the country as if of no importance, said, " Well, Seward, I've this morning decided that Chicago post office appointment."

To represent the United States at the Court of the Tuileries, it was necessary to replace Mr. Faulkner, a Southern appointee of the last administration, who, in good faith, had informed the Imperial Government on the very eve of war, that force would not

be resorted to in suppressing the rebellion. The President made a fortunate selection for this important position in a former Senator, Mr. Dayton, who had, like Seward, been sharpened by the practise of public life. A remarkable feature of American democracy is that its very freedom from the empire of fixed traditions gives its abler representatives a ready power of assimilation to every need and circumstance. Dayton's lack of previous training in foreign affairs was never apparent. On more than one occasion his judgment was to prove sounder than Seward's, and in all his dealings with men of the wide experience of Thouvenel and Drouyn de Lhuys, it cannot be said that either the dignity or the interests of the United States suffered. In that diplomatic intercourse which is the common language of nations, be upheld with rare prudence and ability the trust a great country had confided to his care, although his task, as the accredited envoy of an

unpopular Government, supposedly destined to failure, was by no means easy to fulfil.

Mr. Slidell, on the other hand, the Confederate Agent to France, was the unrecognised representative of a sympathetic and seemingly victorious cause. He was a man of fascinating manners and appearance, of discretion and ability, who, though a Northerner by birth, had identified himself with the South, and, before the war, had gained prominence in the United States Senate by his ardent defence of slave rights. He could well compare his mission in Paris to that of Benjamin Franklin, who, eighty years earlier at the Court of Louis XVI., enlisted the generous aid and sympathy of France in our struggle for liberty. That sympathy he enjoyed already, and if his advocacy of the Confederate cause made him welcome at the Tuileries, the charm and cleverness of his wife, only added to this popularity. His position was none

the less an unofficial one pending that recognition of the Slave States which never came. The rare written communications he received from the French Government were addressed to him simply as Mr. Slidell, and his audiences with the Emperor were arranged, not by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, but through M. de Persigny, who was the South's stoutest advocate by the Imperial person. Mr. Slidell, however, proved indefatigable in procuring allies to aid his cause. If the Duc de Morny remained lukewarm to his appeal, if Thouvenel, and later Drouyn de Lhuys, mindful of their great trust, were non-committal, Rouher, the exponent of Imperial policy in the Chamber, at first an opponent, was won over by him to the support of the South, and of all the Emperor's surroundings only Prince Napoleon sided with the Union.

This general sympathy of the Imperial Government for the Southern cause proved at first a bitter disappointment to the North,

which had counted on the ancient tradition of French friendship without realizing that this could be extended as well to the South. The Federal Authorities expected a more benevolent neutrality from France especially, and felt therefore irritated by the reception of the Confederate Commissioners in Paris, although these had been introduced as private individuals. Seward for a time almost contemplated breaking off diplomatic relations, but a wiser policy prevailed at Washington, while Thouvenel on his part tactfully explained the incident. As Minister of Foreign Affairs he told Dayton that he regarded it his duty to obtain information from all sources, and that on the same day he had received envoys from Garibaldi and the King of Naples; he added, moreover, that he wished to impress on the Confederates the uselessness of their then seeking for recognition.

Perhaps because of the unofficial character of later similar audiences, the Emperor felt

bolder to vent both his sympathies and his desire to aid the South. On at least one occasion he expressed his views to Slidell unknown to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. But the Confederate, who could not understand how the many previous professions of Imperial good will and the reported interchange of views with the British Government were compatible with so little action, was disillusionized when the Emperor told him that it was in accordance with diplomatic usage to consider nothing to exist that had not formally been written. Slidell on his side glided over knotty points, and when the Emperor remarked that Richmond was illuminated on hearing of the capture of Puebla by his Mexican expedition, he said nothing, though he wrote to the Confederate Secretary of State that he considered this news somewhat apocryphal. To the frequent expression of Napoleon's southern sympathies, Slidell answered by lavish promises of cotton and gratitude. But the Emperor took

occasion to remind him that the sympathy of nations did not control their policy and in so grave a matter he was unwilling to act without England.

The policy of an Anglo-French concert had guided Napoleon from the beginning of the war, when France followed Great Britain in recognizing the belligerency of the Slave States. The two nations thought that by acting together they would better be able to protect their rights as neutrals. They tried to gain greater scope for this concert by obtaining its acquiescence at Washington. On June 15, 1861, the Ministers of France and Great Britain, Mr. Mercier and Lord Lyons, appeared at the Department of State and asked to be received together. Seward had them shown into the Assistant Secretary's room. He entered smiling, shaking his head as he protested, "No, no, this will never do. I cannot see you in that way." One Minister suggested that they were carrying

out their instructions, and the other urged that they be allowed to state the object of their visit. "No," said Seward, "we must start right about it, whatever it is. Mr. Mercier, will you do me the favour to dine with me this evening, and if Lord Lyons will step into my room with me now, we will discuss what he has to say." They objected to this good-naturedly, but Seward declined to receive them together and in a pleasant manner won the day by his firmness.

Again, on a little later occasion, when the English and French Consuls at Charleston were instructed to act together in securing from the Confederacy the observance of certain neutral rights, although the Federal Government revoked the English Consul's exequatur, his French colleague was left untouched, not to give the two countries a common grievance.

Seward had recovered his balance as Secretary of State, and from this time on he displayed a mastery of the diplomatic

aspects of the war which by avoiding all opportunity for foreign interference was to prove invaluable to the success of the Federal cause. Fortunately, the early mistakes made by our diplomacy admitted of remedy. After the policy of seeking a foreign conflict had been dismissed, the tone of irritability Seward previously assumed gave way to a more moderate attitude. If he failed to convince Europe of his theory that so far as foreign nations were concerned America was at peace, he was entirely successful in upholding what was to be the cardinal principle of our Civil War diplomacy—but it is characteristic of greatness to yield in detail while remaining firm in the main. On one essential point, Seward never wavered. Though he dressed his answers with all the courtesy which diplomatic language requires, his purpose was unbending in maintaining that foreign interference would neither be invoked nor admitted, and that such intervention would oblige the United States to treat as enemies

whoever should yield to it. He desired above all to create the impression that though not seeking a foreign war the country did not dread it. His despatches often penned for later public effect were only read in portions by our envoys, but were afterwards printed whole, thus acquiring for Seward in a harmless way the reputation of being a daring statesman. Nor could he have wished for higher praise than the extreme irritation this caused on leading Confederates, who fumed because they thought Europe over-estimated the power and purpose of the North. Napoleon would certainly have been willing to assist the South, if he could have done so safely. On more than one occasion he was about to act, and later regretted, as he told Slidell, that he had failed to seize the opportunity. But the tide of Southern successes which he awaited never came, and the scattered Confederate victories only proved stillborn. If, therefore, Persigny encouraged the Emperor to intervene in America, if

Mercier, writing from Washington, encouraged him, if English Members of Parliament encouraged him, if Napoleon himself was anxious to act, not only to increase his own prestige, not only to alleviate industrial distress in France, which suffered from the war in America, but likewise desiring to establish a Latin Empire in Mexico, for which a divided North and South was necessary, he was haunted by the fear lest Palmerston should seek to embroil him in war with the United States.

If ambition spurred him on, prudence restrained his natural indecision. He adopted a middling course which led him no further. His attempts to obtain English and Russian aid in mediation were rebuffed. His efforts to tender it outright to the American belligerents were rejected by the North. He was even obliged to disavow private conversations at his own table, which ill-advised partisans of the South prejudiced their cause by indiscreetly

utilizing. It is to his credit to have had the courage to realize in time, that the vital interests of France were not in America, and to have sacrificed his own ambitions by refusing to plunge his country into a useless war. And it is to the credit of the statesmanship of his able Ministers, Thouvenel and Drouyn de Lhuys, that they guided his course for prudence and the best interests of the French nation in dissuading their Imperial Master from recognizing the Confederacy.

It must be confessed that in the end, military success was at the bottom of the North's diplomatic triumph in preventing mediation. But it is arrogating to diplomacy a field not its own, to pretend that it can run counter to the defeat of armies; not everyone can play the part of Talleyrand at the Congress of Vienna. During our Civil War when the echo of victory was so soon heard in Paris and London, both Northern and Southern envoys realized that the God of

battles was necessary to their success. It is likely that recognition might have come in the end if the news of the great victories in 1863, by dealing a crushing blow to the Confederacy, had not saved both France and the United States from the disastrous effect of such a measure. Thenceforth no power could be identified with a losing cause, nor take the side of slavery against freedom. In vain, during the last year of the war, Slidell, acting with full authority, offered, not only to assist the Emperor in his Mexican venture, but even, it was said, to cede Texas to France. Two years earlier such a bait might have proved irresistible, but it had come too late.

It will always remain a proof of the chivalrous sentiments in the French nation, that after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation liberating the slaves, its sympathies were with the North in the struggle against slavery. The traditional friendship between France and the United States

was perhaps not foreign to this. As Seward in one of his despatches took occasion to remark, "The attachment of the American people to France differs from the sentiment they bear to every other country. They honour and love France because both nations can cherish with pride and pleasure the memories of a time when they were allies."